

PIECES report

Brazil summer project

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"Help and experience", that could have been our motto at the beginning of the trip. After a little preparation and a long flight, we (Alexia, Elena, Michael and Valentina) arrived in Sao Paulo full of anticipation. Anticipation, however, not in the sense of relaxation and caipirinhas on the beach, but rather of diving into a whole new world and making a small contribution. Already on the car ride to Arco, where we get a small glimpse of what favela means, our eyes got big and the excitement grew: What will await us? What will life in the favela feel like and what will the children be like... When the car took the last turn, unloaded our suitcases and got the first tour by Heidi, the radiant Swiss woman who runs the organisation, we were amazed at how beautiful and with what a special charm the school stands out from the precarious area. We got even more excited about making our contribution.

ARCO- the Crèche

After a short introduction and a tour of the grounds on Monday, we started directly into our new daily routine on Tuesday. Two days a week we taught English or helped in the kindergarten (Crèche). What amazed us most was the joy of life of the staff and the children. Everyone welcomed us with a cheerful laugh. The children are incredibly lively and sweet. We were immediately allowed to help in the groups and were integrated into the whole daily routine. We were very impressed by the fact that the children get 3 meals a day and numerous snacks. A lot of attention is paid to a balanced and healthy diet at an early age. They always get fresh fruit between meals and as dessert. Care is also taken to ensure that the children can engage in different activities, such as singing, building with blocks, or running in the playground. In addition, care is taken to ensure that the children learn procedures and routines that they may not have enough of at home.

The interaction of the teachers with the children is very affectionate, with almost every child receiving individual attention. The family spirit of the community is noticeable. It is clear to see that the children are given the best possible foundation for development from an early age (Elena)

ARCO- school and English lessons

The English level of the children in Arco was very low when we arrived. After almost two years of pandemic, as you might expect, a lot has been forgotten. In the first English lessons, communication and understanding were a big challenge. We started with the basic alphabet and slowly refreshed all the knowledge. What impressed us the most, however, was that you can learn a lot in a short time, especially through fun activities and a little motivation. We noticed this especially with the younger children, with whom we playfully went through topics such as numbers, colours and animals. It is unbelievable how with a mere piece of paper, a pair of coloured pencils and games, you can open the door of the learning process so easily

and, hopefully, give the children here a chance for a better future. What we also experienced in the school lessons is the great curiosity that the Arco students bring with them. And this despite the big language barrier: we, with our beginner level Portuguese, and the children, with a few English words they still know from class or have learned thanks to a song. Not all of the children participated in our English lessons because it is an extra offer for those who want to participate and sign up for it. Nevertheless, it is good that all children have the opportunity to learn English so that one day they will have the privilege to communicate everywhere and, hopefully, feel less constrained.

If I had to describe Arco in one word, I would use "magical". I forgot my sense of time here and enjoyed every moment with the children, the staff, the caregivers and the other helpers. Every single smile and hug after a couple of hours spent together is immortalised in my mind. These are the little moments that I will carry in my heart forever (Alexia)

Arco- the environment

It was heart-warming to see how all the staff put their heart and soul into working at Arco and how they fit in as part of one big Arco family. This became clear to me, for example, when a kindergarten teacher talked about her daughter, who is 24 years old and works with young people at school, but who herself has been at the Arco kindergarten since she was a baby. The kindergarten teacher has been working at Arco for 30 years and so the organisation has blended with her family.

The cooperation with the Arco staff went very well, because we volunteers appreciated being here and experiencing something extraordinary, and the staff was often happy to have an extra helping hand, especially with the babies who need a lot of care. Although we are not from this area or even Brazil, we were not outsiders in Arco, but everyone, children and staff, made an effort to communicate with us in some way. The kitchen staff were happy to explain to us what each dish was called and what the ingredients were, and the children were happy to tell us about their free time and ask us about our lives.

Arco does not only stand for love, respect and cooperation, but also for equal opportunities, so it is clear that Arco is not only a family, but also wants to prepare children for their future. Many people work hard to give the children the best foundation to enter the workforce and take their destiny into their own hands (Valentina)

The time at Arco was very special. Not only the children, but also the staff and especially the whole Arco community is really unique. Even though we were only allowed to be part of this world for a short time, we were able to gather many unforgettable impressions and are very grateful to have met so many warm and open people.

Safety & weekend trips

Safety in the favela

Walking around in the favela is safe, especially near the school. You can walk around freely, even alone, during the day. The only path that you are forced to take on foot is the connection between the Crèche (kindergarten) and the school, which takes 2-3 minutes. This path is safe and you can walk this path even alone at night. You will never be asked to walk around the favela for any other reason, for example, the food shopping will be organized for you.

Everywhere in the favela, especially when you walk around in large, mixed-gender groups, even only volunteers, you are safe. They immediately see that you are a “gringo” or “gringa” but they know we are volunteers so they are either friendly or neutral towards us. On the other hand, one afternoon after work three of us, all girls, walked around and only walked back when it was getting dark, so we felt a little bit uneasy because of the looks that they gave us or some words that they called out, even though nothing happened. It is useful to keep in mind the time when the sun sets – around 7PM.

Weekend destinations

In the four weekends we had we went to Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Paraty, and Guarujà. The general rule is that wherever there is a crowd, you are safe, wherever you are alone, you are not so safe. So, for example a beach or street with people, tourists, vendors, etc. is safe, whereas an empty street where you are walking by, even just for a few hundred meters, is not safe – even worse when it is dark.

Paraty and Guarujà are quite touristy so quite safe. The only tip is try not to get ripped off by street vendors, fruit stalls or even (happened to us on one occasion) restaurants. Ask for the price beforehand and check the bill before paying. Both destinations were very cool, in Paraty I recommend going on a boat tour.

Sao Paulo is an enormous city and the safety depends on the area. The center, i.e. the area around the Cathedral, is, sadly, populated by many homeless people, which can make you feel unsafe. The area around the main street of Japan Town (Liberdade) is also not really safe. Nevertheless, I am happy that we saw these places. On the other hand, the Avenida Paulista is safe, and worth a trip to as there are many shops and museums along this avenue, furthermore it is closed off to traffic on Sundays. Another safe district, which was also one of our favorites, was Embu das Artes.

Rio de Janeiro has a reputation for being very unsafe so really plan this trip ahead keeping in mind that your hotel should be in a safe area, and that you should be able to reach every place by Uber. Never walk from one place to the next if you do not know the path very well. Tourist attractions are safe - once you have gotten there safely: Copacabana, Praia da Barra, Corcovado (Christ the Redeemer), Pao de Azucar (sugarloaf mountain), botanical garden. One evening we walked around Lapa where you can find the Escadaria Selaron (colorful steps), and as it was Carnaval, it was full with people, and the resulting feeling was that it is a semi-safe area.

Crime and carnival

Going to touristy and/or crowded place is safe. The only constant threat, just like in any big city, are pickpockets. This is especially true during Carnival, a period during which a lot of street parties, the so-called “blocos” or “bloquinhos” take place in the cities (not in the favela). You can go to these parties but beware of pickpockets and take care of where you put your drink. The Sambadromes in both Rio and Sao Paulo are safe once you get inside, but the area around them is quite unsafe as they are situated in areas that are a bit outside, uncrowded, or on the contrary in the middle of some bloco.

We never saw any armed person. The only crime we ever assisted was someone on a bike who pickpocketed a by-passer on a busy street in Sao Paulo.

Transportation

Taking an uber was always safe. We never took public transportation such as metro or bus, but the other volunteers do that. Some Ubers, especially with fancy cars, will refuse to take you to certain areas, such as the favela, as they feel it is unsafe.

Tips

Displaying possessions. Do not bring or wear expensive jewellery, watches, expensive clothing brands. Still bring nice clothes to wear on special occasions.

Phone. Do not showcase your phone on the street. In areas you don't know, try to plan your journey while you are still inside a safe place, and when you go outside, avoid using your phone. One of us had bought a 100 euro iPhone before the trip to Brasil and it was a very good idea because this was our back-up phone which we could bring everywhere without worrying too much that it would get stolen, for example at the carnival street parties. I recommend that you buy a Brazilian SIM card once you get there, it is quite cheap. It is paramount that at least two people among the volunteer group buy a Sim card in order to have internet during the trips.

Hotel. When you plan a weekend trip, only book a hotel/hostel that is in a safe area. Always check the reviews.

Payment. Credit card is accepted almost everywhere apart from some street vendors, so you won't need too much cash in Real (currency in Brasil). Still, you might need some cash: especially when you go to an unsafe area, only bring cash and leave your credit card in the hotel. The best thing is to simply withdraw cash from an ATM once you get to Brasil. I do not recommend bringing euros/francs to change in Brasil, as they charge a quite high commission at the airport. Sometimes it is even possible to go to a bar and buy e.g. a bottle of water, pay an extra amount by card and get the extra amount returned in cash, even though a commission is applied. When you pay by card, they will ask whether your card is "debito o credito", and as we found out, all our cards, even debit cards, were "credito."

Documents. To check into the hotels, and sometimes even to take the bus, you will need your real passport or ID. However, in circumstances where this can be avoided, leave your passport behind and only take a copy with you. Heidi can make a certified copy (beglaubigte Kopie) of it, but you need to ask her some time ahead. The safest place to deposit your phone, money and document while travelling is a fanny bag.

Further advice

- **Contact Heidi** before going to Brazil and ask what items they need the most at the moment. In our case it was blankets, duvets, etc. Another thing I noticed is what children really need are shoes, maybe if you have old shoes you could bring them. (Fun/sad fact: kids also walk in flip flops during winter time).
- The kids love receiving **presents**, so sweets and school accessories are really appreciated (e.g. new pens, new highlighters, biscuits, candies)
- In the evenings it mostly gets colder and rainy, so bring more than **one pair of long trousers/leggings and sweaters**. Especially if you will go in winter time (we were there

in summer time), the other volunteers mentioned it can get really cold and the house is not heated.

- Bring comfortable **shoes** for rainy days/evenings and a **raincoat**.
- Bring a sleeping bag, mosquito net (some are also already there), medications
- **Plan in advance** if you want to go to any event etc in order to buy tickets or if you want to do a longer journey at the end of the project, then already buy the flight tickets early enough because they get quickly expensive (e.g. if you want to go to Iguazu falls)
- Bring enough T-shirts and **comfortable** trousers / long dresses to teach
- The washing machine does not always work that well, I always washed my stuff by hand and with a **“travel soap”**.
- Bring no valuable **jewelry**, even if the favela is safe, it is better to not risk it (especially if you go to Sao Paolo center or Rio)
- In the **evenings** there is not always very much to do, what we did was usually cook together with the other volunteers, go for food shopping, the cemetery (it is really beautiful), walk in the “favela center” or go to malls close by. Still, I would always try to plan something.
- The two of us who already knew some Italian, had a very big advantage in understanding **Portuguese**. This made the communication with the children much easier and the whole journey even more interesting because we were in the end able to have conversations with the locals (from the Uber drivers, to the teachers in the schools, the people in restaurants or the kids in ARCO). Thus, if you have no Spanish or Italian knowledge, I would really recommend some Duo Lingo or YouTube videos to learn some basic words and sentences.
- Last but not least, try to **enjoy** the time there as much as possible because the days pass really quickly. Be open for new things, new food, seeing new places and trying to get to know the local people.